

Q: Good afternoon. Today is April 6, 2017. My name is Jenny Pushner and I'm here at City Hall with Fred. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. The first question is: What country are you originally from?

A: Originally from China, but you know there are two Chinas, one is Taiwan. From originally in Taiwan, I mean in China, but I moved to Taiwan in '49 when communists took over, so I came from Taiwan.

Q: Why did you leave Taiwan?

A: To pursue graduate studies, advanced studies.

Q: How old were you when you left, and who did you leave with?

A: I'm sorry, how old...?

Q: How old were you when you left Taiwan and who did you leave with?

A: I went to Taiwan in '49, I must be 17 or 18, then I left at 20, 27.

Q: Did you leave alone or did you leave with somebody?

A: I left alone, with just one small suitcase.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your experience leaving the country?

A: Leaving Taiwan?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, at that time I was young. Like most of the young people, you go to a new place to do what you want to do, to study. So there was excitement.

Q: Why did you choose the United States?

A: That was the only place where one could get advanced learnings. And also, the universities at that time, I think it was after the Soviet Sputnik, so there were lots of scholarships, teaching, research. America was just wide open! Welcome all the students from other countries.

Q: So why Newton? Why did you choose Newton out of all the places?

A: I first went to St. Louis, Washington University where I got my degree, PhD. After that I taught for four years at Virginia Tech then moved here because they hired me, Northeastern hired me.

Q: How long have you been in Newton?

A: We moved here in '67, so that will become 50 years. That's why I volunteered to be a part of the interview, to contribute whatever is needed.

Q: That's awesome. What was it like when you first arrived in Newton?

A: Well I prepared a little bit, just notes for myself. When I arrived in Newton, it was difficult, I mean different from now. It was more rural-like. For example, in the fall, people would still--after all the leaves fell, people would still burn the leaves, they choose a day and then burn

the leaves, instead of being collected. But then I think two or three years later, it was banned. So that's one example of how the city has changed.

Q: Do you remember your first day in Newton?

A: Well, the first day in Newton is not much different from the first day in America. It's just another place in the United States.

Q: So what was your first day in the US like?

A: The first day in the US was very exciting. I was welcomed by a host family in St. Louis, they took me to the dorm, and so forth. That was very, very interesting and also to the new students very comforting to know that you are taken care of.

Q: Can you share a story about your first experience with learning English?

A: Well, I think to speak English as a foreign language, it really depends on your prior learning, education. Now in China, everyone starts to learn English at the age of 13, junior high. You study six years of English in high school. In China, high school--junior high, and senior high were all called high school. Then at the end, some would do better, and some would not learn much. It really depends on your attitude and maybe your talent, or whatever. So I did better. In fact, I just fill in a little bit of my history, before I came to the States to study, pursue graduate study, I was in the Chinese Navy, so the Navy sent me to San Francisco to study electronics, radar, sonar. So I had prior experience of more than half a year in California, so speaking English when I came as a student, it wasn't a problem.

Q: What are one or two differences/similarities you've noticed in the cultures here versus in Taiwan or in China?

A: The cultures...the same...I think both in Taiwan or in China, and the US, I think people would respect the family and the family relationship. You always, you know, here, people in Christmas would go home to gather with the family and in China, in the Chinese New Year, in China and Taiwan, people would travel thousands of miles to go home, to get together. What's the other question you said?

Q: What was one difference?

A: One difference...I think in the US, people stress more the individual values, independence, whereas in China youngsters have to listen to their elders, listen to their parents, and so forth. That's why US has been strong because you encourage independent thinking, revolution--not in the literal sense, revolution in technology and the evolutions that came from this independence, to me.

Q: How do you think you adjusted to the differences between the cultures?

A: I think gradually. I think now I am more to the American culture. Just tell you one recent story, my experience. I am 85. So I had a collection of books, Chinese books, some passed to me by my father. And recently I thought, well, after my wife and I are gone, then what happen to the books? Our kids, they don't read it, they cannot read it--they will just throw it away as garbage, as trash. So we donated to library, to the Chinese History Library in San Francisco. We paid the expenses, postage and so forth. All right, that's very fine, I think. All our friends here would say, "That's a good thing you did." But when my brother in China learned, he is so angry! This should be passed from father to son, not to be given away. That's something he is ashamed to tell his friends, that his brother did this. That's just one ready example, when you ask, that just came to me, top of my head. I'm still angry at him.

Q: That's a good example. So what are one or two changes in lifestyle you made when you came here?

A: One or two changes in what?

Q: In your lifestyle, that you made when you came here.

A: Lifestyle...I think, well, to be truth, being a professor at a research university, you have to keep up, so you work--at least for me--work day and night, so I really don't have much time to ponder about anything else. So to me I have change that...I be a hard worker.

Q: What traditions have you maintained, when you came?

A: Family, family ties. I have three daughters. They all graduated from Newton South. That was happy to see. They went separately to Yale, to Princeton, and Berkeley. Now they are, one of them is a medical professor in San Francisco, one is in Newton, and the other in New York. She had a law degree but she preferred to teach violin, so she teaches Suzuki violin at home. That's one thing I...since I learned that there would be two or three, one or two high school students here, so I want especially say, "You are lucky to be in the best school in the country."

Q: Very lucky, yeah. So since you have moved to the US and to Newton have you started any new traditions?

A: Not really, except that we gather together on Christmas. We don't really celebrate Christmas, but it happens that our kids have vacation during Christmas, and we just follow the trend.

Q: Do you guys still get together on the Chinese New Year or no?

A: Not really. Over the years, we even forgot what date the Chinese New Year falls on, until only very recently, when there are more Chinese in this country, coming really from China and not from Taiwan. We came from Taiwan, and for a long time there was nobody coming from Taiwan or China, until the '80's or '90's. One big change I can tell you, that in Newton, when we came in '67 there were very few Asians . When we went to grocery store, my wife bought a little sack of rice. The cashier said, "Oh, you are from South Pacific restaurant." But now, 16% of Newton residents are Asians. But that's nothing, compared to 22% in Lexington. They all choose to come to Lexington or Newton because of the school system.

Q: When you first came to the US, what were your hopes for yourself?

A: Hoped to get an advanced degree. To me. But now, for many of the people from China, they just want to make money. They don't care much about studying,

Q: When you came to study, did you think you were going to go back to China or probably stay after?

A: I wouldn't go back to China because it had been under Communist rule. Even today, I don't want to move back to China. Although we have visited China, we have relatives there. But we didn't expect to go back to Taiwan. There was nothing one could do, there are more opportunities here. So I got teaching, got a research job and raised a family.

Q: Did you meet your wife in the US?

A: We met in Taiwan, but we married in the US in St. Louis, right after I got my degree, before we moved to Virginia.

Q: So she came to the US from Taiwan?

A: Yeah, I think she came to US two or three years after I came, but we already knew each other.

Q: That's sweet. Was your idea of America or Newton the same as the reality for you?

A: Well, I think at that time, people from Taiwan had no concept of what real the US was. The only thing we knew was the things you see in movie. But when we arrived, it was totally different. It's hard work, we know that would be hard work.

Q: What was the most important and meaningful event or experience of your life?

A: Meaningful event? Excuse me...Making an accomplishment in my own field. For example, two or three years ago, I should have brought a copy, the leading physics journal in England, okay, made a special issue, they honor my 80 years birthday with a special issue with my photo in the cover page and so forth. So that's certainly something one would feel happy about.

Q: What have you...maybe not discovered, but like what have you accomplished in physics, in your career?

A: I had more than 200 papers published. You can access the list from the Northeastern physics web page. But, well, nothing...because of the field I am in, statistical mechanics, so it's not high energy physics, it's nothing of Nobel Prize caliber, but they are all contributions, they increase one's knowledge. So that's what I'm proud of.

Q: That's awesome. That's really cool.

A: Thank you.

Q: You just shared one of your most meaningful and important successes. What was something very challenging for you, when you came to the US or just in your lifetime?

A: Well I came to the US, I don't know, well eventually if you go to graduate school, you will know the first challenge was you have to pass the qualifying exam for a PhD. I studied hard one year without going out. I was in Washington University for a year, and after a year a friend of mine took me for a ride in the night to go to White Castle, get a hamburger. I said, "Wow! There are lights!" There were colors, neon tubes. I was not aware of...maybe my experience is unique. Not everybody is like me. But at that time, many people devoted their time to study.

Q: Would you say it was harder for you because you were an immigrant, than somebody else who--

A: No, no. It turns out it's not. It's a, US is a very just society. No prejudice.

Q: That's awesome. What has your experience living in the United States been like?

A: What's my experience like...I can say...the progress...let me see...One thing I noticed, I mentioned is diversity of people, immigrants. I myself is an immigrant, I think I contribute to the society here. If I didn't come, no one would have made the contribution in my place. But recently you probably read in the paper that the administration is against immigration, and formulated all the barriers. I think that's going backward.

Q: Have you seen any direct benefits in the the United States' culture because of all of the immigrants that come and the mixed race and--

A: Yeah, of course. I am only familiar with the Chinese immigrants. I am sure there are immigrants from other countries as well. There are so many huge contributions of Chinese

immigrants. You know the John Hancock Hall, that was built by architect by the name of Pei, that is world-known architect. If you go to DC, the Vietnam Memorial was designed, was built by immigrant while she was student at Yale. There are countless examples. I watch that carefully, if you try to read, try to find the Nobel Prize winners in sciences and medicine, every year many from the US, but they are I guarantee 80 or 90% are immigrants.

Q: Very cool. Can you think of one or two common values, or beliefs, or practices that you would help people in the United States to understand your culture?

A: I'm sorry, can you repeat again.

Q: Yes. Can you think of one or two common values or practices that you have that would help people understand Chinese and Taiwanese culture?

A: You mean to people here?

Q: Yes.

A: To understand...I think the best way to understand a culture is really to go there, spend some time. If you just read, it's not getting to the bone, getting to the inside. You really have to experience yourself, to me. Just like me, to understand the American culture I have to be here. I read about it in Taiwan, I saw in a movie, but that doesn't count. That's not helpful.

Q: How do you think, because it's hard to understand Taiwanese and Chinese culture from the movies, how do you think the movies portray it? Is it accurate, or...?

A: I think, at that time--okay, now may be different--at that time, the movies would portrait only the upper class, their living. There were very few movies devoted to describe--say, the poverty in

the US, or the underclass, the working class. But now there are movies, although they are not the best sellers, but the scope has changed, has widened. In the 50's, I mean 1950's, the 1960's, America would export its films and movies, [00:25:18] just name a few, some starred by Grace Kelly--I don't know whether you know the name--the movie Rear Window. She eventually married the Prince of Morocco. She was so beautiful. You know, people would think, back home, would think, everyone, every girl, every woman in the US is as beautiful and so polished. I recommend you see one or two of her movies.

Q: I've seen lots of her movies, yeah. I really like her. Rear Window is a great movie. What advice would you give to someone moving here from Taiwan or China?

A: My advice is that...work hard. Don't expect things will come easy, and be open-minded. Be open-minded, yeah. Accept the local values. Don't be confined to your own set of mind.

Q: So, this isn't a question here, but you said to be open-minded, so how do you think...like do you think when you came you were very open-minded? Or did you have to change some things?

A: I think when I came it's just a change. It was just a change. If you tell me open-minded at that time, I didn't know what it says, what does it mean. Now I know because there are so many aspects of the American culture. So you have to open your eyes to see them. But when someone just arrives in 20 years age, the contact is limited. Just as I said, in the first year I really seldom got out of the campus. If people tell me, "You should be open-minded," I don't know what it says. But now, because there are more radio, TV, and iPhone, iPad, so people have more contact to the outside. The situation is different.

Q: When you were in university, and you said it was...you didn't really have a real reality, because you were just studying, but were the kids you were surrounded with, were they from all over or were they just mainly from the US?

A: Kids, what do you mean by kids?

Q: The other people studying with you--

A: Oh I see. Well, to tell you the truth, at that time, the American students going to graduate school in physics, they were all nuts! They only study. They were not the typical Americans. So we stuck together. Some of them did very well. One guy, we had the same advisor. A black student. He eventually made it to the director, for example, director of the Argonne National Laboratory, the director of the National Science Foundation. Another classmate of mine who is Chinese made it to the first president, the founding president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. That was in the 1980's, a very close friend. We still keep in touch with each other. In fact, at that time, he invited me to join him in Hong Kong to establish the university. For various reasons, I didn't go. But I'm glad I stuck here to do my own research.

Q: You said you didn't get to meet the real Americans, I guess, real...while you were studying, so when you moved to Newton you met other people who weren't as focused--

A: I moved to Virginia, Blacksburg, Virginia and taught there four years before I came here, so my mind, well, of course, began to open.....in fact, I brought something....I mentioned earlier I was in Chinese Navy when I was younger. I was interviewed by the Academia Sinica in Taiwan about my early experience in the Chinese Navy. That also include part of my early education here. They published the interview. Fortunately, I had someone translate it into English, so I can leave a copy if you want to see it. There are some photos, because Ann told me that maybe I should bring some photos of the family, and so forth. So there are photos of my family, I just show you--

__: So we can look at those after...

A: Yeah, right. Anyway, I'm leaving a copy for you. You don't have to look it, but if you found it to be interesting, then I have an extra copy anyway.

__: With the Chinese Navy, did they help pay for some of your education, the way that the US Army and stuff does?

A: No, it had nothing to do with my graduate study. But I did learn much English when I made my tour in San Francisco for training in electronics.

Q: So they covered your studies?

A: Not "they"--the American military covered it. That's part of the military assistance to various countries, to the developing countries. I'm sure is still in existence to the developing countries, these days.

Q: It looks like our time is just about up. But what is one more thing you would like people a hundred years from now to know about your experience immigrating?

A: I think a hundred years from now people would take a look at notes or whatever you have in society and compare to what was available at that time and see what has changed. You see, it's only after you make, after you travel a certain distance and stop and looking back, you can realize the change. Now, if you have been here, I've been here for 50 years. I don't realize change very much, unless I stop and I look back, I see, as I said, I can see the benefit of the good school system of Newton. Another thing I'd like to mention is the residents including us are very much benefited by the construction of the Free Library by Mayor Mann. I don't know whether you remember him. He was a great mayor and it was through his effort that a free library was established. He was found to have cancer; at that time people wanted to name the library after him, and he refused.

Q: Thank you so much for your time to do this with us. We are really happy to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW